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UNCLAS LILONGWE 000204

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [MI](#)

SUBJECT: Elections: Bias in State-Owned Media

REF: A) Lilongwe 143  
B) 03 Lilongwe 1058  
C) 03 Lilongwe 1202

1. With elections just 66 days away, the government-controlled media remains biased in its coverage, broadcasting pro-government news and ruling party campaign reports while providing almost no access to the opposition. The Public Affairs Committee, a local civil society group composed of influential religious leaders, initiated legal proceedings on March 10 against the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) and Television Malawi (TVM) for their bias. The Lilongwe Press Club recorded interviews with the different parties and bought airtime on MBC, but MBC has refused to broadcast them, saying that they can only be aired during the campaign period, which begins on March 20.

2. Though government, MBC, and TVM officially have denied any bias, post's monthly overview of state radio news clearly shows the strong pro-government bias of MBC. The Malawi Electoral Commission's Media Monitoring Unit has also been issuing reports indicating that the "positive news share" on MBC and TVM overwhelmingly favors the UDF.

3. Comment: The Constitution requires that MBC and TVM provide equal access to all parties during the official campaign from March 20 to May 18. During the 1999 elections, state-run media did not comply. Criticism of MBC and TVM has been sharp over the last several months, and pressure from the opposition, civil society, and donors may compel the broadcasters to provide somewhat more balanced coverage this year. That being said, we do not expect equal or equitable access to be given to the opposition. End comment.

Browning